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ABSTRACT

In 1974, as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) survey in writing, 4,600 17-year-old high school students were asked to write an essay defending their position on women's place in the home. About half responded that it should be a women's choice whether to be a homemaker, career woman, or both. About twenty percent said women should be allowed to work under certain conditions, such as when they do not have children. Nearly thirty percent said women definitely belong at home. Predictably, more females than males felt that women should have a choice about working. In addition, attitudes and reasons given for staying at home were examined extensively. Findings suggest that many young American women are uncertain about their future roles in society; new and broadening job opportunities for women are encouraging career aspirations that conflict directly with traditional values. Writing ability was also measured and classified as inadequate, barely adequate, competent, or excellent. More than half the 17-year-olds could write competently or better. About thirty percent, however, did not show an understanding of the basic methods of persuasive writing. (TA)

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A WOMAN'S PLACE

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Many people were instrumental in the analysis that undergirded the development of this article. Special thanks should go to Ina Mullis, Senior Research Analyst in NAEP's Department of Analysis and Research, Alex Pearson, Statistical Research Associate, and Janet Bailey and Valerie Daniels, Research Assistants. Credit should go also to Sue Worthen and the scoring staff at Measurement Research Center in Iowa City, Iowa.

"A WOMAN'S PLACE"

The working woman is a fact of contemporary American life. More than half of all adult women now work, and U. S. Labor Department studies indicate that 9 out of every 10 females will work outside the home at some point in their lives. The ranks of working women cut across all age and income levels and range from single women to married mothers of preschool children.

Although women in the United States have been employed, to some extent, ever since the country was founded, their impact on the labor market has been fairly minimal until the latter part of this century. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women filled 2 out of every 10 jobs in 1920. By 1973, the female share of the market had doubled, with women occupying 4 of every 10 jobs.

In 1974, as a small part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) survey in writing, 4,600 17-year-old high school students were asked to write an essay from the following: "Some people believe that a woman's place is in the home. Others do not. Take one side of this issue. Write an essay in which you state your position and defend it."

About half responded that "a woman's place is where she wants it to be," that is, it should be her choice whether to be a homemaker, career woman or both.

About 20% said women should be allowed to work under certain conditions, such as if they do not have children. Nearly 30% said women definitely belong at home.

Predictably, more females than males felt women should have a choice about working. A total of 58% of the females said women should work wherever they want, while 41% of the males shared this opinion. Conversely, 37% of the males felt women belonged at home compared with 21% of the females.

Writing Ability Measured

The essay question was part of the writing assessment that was given to 80,000 9-, 13- and 17-year-olds. The scoring of "woman's place" sought to measure an ability to write persuasively. Those assessed were asked to take one side of the issue, state a position and defend it. Scores were not based on spelling, syntax or the writer's point of view, but on the writer's ability to defend his or her position. The essays were read by experienced English and composition teachers. Each essay was rated by two readers; if they disagreed, the score was reconciled by a third. The essays were grouped into four categories: inadequate, barely adequate, competent and excellent. According to National Assessment analyst Ina Mullis, more than half the 17-year-olds could write competently or better. About 30%, however, "did not show an understanding of the basic methods used to write persuasively."

The 30% who ranked in the inadequate category either did not take a clear position or stated a position but gave no reasons. In the following example, the writer seems to argue in favor of both sides of the issue:

> A woman's place is not at home because I know she wouldn't like to be at home all the time doing housework everyday, but if she has kids she would have to pay somebody to watch them, that's if she had a job.

The competent essays maintained a position and listed at least one reason with some supporting details or two or three unsupported reasons:

> One should not generalize about "a woman's place" because like men, a woman should have the choice of her profession. Being a housewife is like any other full time job which should be chosen by the individual. Keeping women in one profession is like telling all men to do the same job. In this way, our society would not be

well rounded or prosper because of the imbalance. Women are human beings like men and should be given the full right of choice.

I believe that women are equal to men and should have the rights of men. They should not be made to stay in the home because tradition dictates that. Women today have much more free time because of the use of machines to do house work so they should be able to do something worthwhile with their time. And be able to get out and work at jobs which they fell they are qualified. Women have as much right to work and be independent as any man does.

I believe a woman's place is at home. The wife should be taking care of the family and home for that is her job. I do agree that if the home needs more money that she should work, but not as a career. Too many families end broken up because if both working, coming home to a dirty house and both very tired. Also the man is the head. Often the woman thinks she can wear the pants, which I don't agree with at all.

Essays that were rated excellent took a consistent position and gave two or more supported reasons or four or more unsupported reasons:

The woman place should be in the home because of the outward forces that will slow her down. For instance let's say a woman trys to work on a job that requires manual labor heavily. She would only get in the way or get herself hurt. The woman should stay at home so that she can cook, clean house, and take care of the children because a majority of the woman while they are girls are raised in a environment where they are taught to be a mother and housekeeper. While on the other hand the man is taught to be the person that works and provide for family and not to be a housemaid. Women are always preaching about liberation but when they get a chance to prove they are equal the majority prove that they are mouth than fact. Even in the Bible the scriptures show that the woman is in the home while the man is in the fields working. Therefore a woman should stay in the home because she was raised with the idea to stay in the home.

A woman's place is not in the home. Woman are human beings, it is their God given right to pursue what ever career they desire. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness have been mentioned in the Declaration of Independence yet woman have been denied their rights in this sexist society. Not everyone wants to do the same job or pursue the same goals, must women be limited to a narrowly defined sphere of activity? No, a resounding no! We are people, human beings with as complex mental, emotional, physical needs as men, a fact ignored. We are regarded as the second sex, the incomplete sex, satisifed and made whole only by a family. And it is this false assumption shared by many

men and women too, fostered by the society we live in that has destroyed many lives because people were not allowed to express the full range of their Godgiven gifts and creativity.

I strongly feel that a womans place is not in the home its anywhere she chooses. First because she is a woman, people label her as a housewife who sit home all day and wash dishes. There are many woman who have alot to offer. They have the ability to do a mans job. so they should be permitted. I think its fine for the woman who choose to have this kind of life, but for those who do not they deserve an equal opportunity. They should not be classified as housewife, this is just one occupation. They have the right to decide what to do with their life.

When women are discriminated against when seeking a job, this is where it is totally unfair. If the woman has the ability they should not even think twice to hire her if she qualifies. Woman who devote their entire lifetime to sitting home wiping runny noses just because of tradition are ruining there lives, I feel. There is time to take care of the family but she should develop her other skills and talents regardless of its an actress or an executive. I think they forget that you only have one life!

Significantly more females than males wrote essays rated competent or better. The difference was greater among the excellent, rather than the competent, essays.

On this particular writing exercise, only 4 percentage points separated the performance of blacks and whites, whereas the average difference between blacks and whites on other writing exercises was approximately 10 percentage points.

Those who performed least well were writers whose parents had no high school education. Nearly 37% of these writers composed inadequate essays, compared with less than 30% inadequate essays for all other levels of parent's education.

In addition to the overall ability to write persuasively, each essay was examined to determine whether it contained reasons or supporting evidence based on something other than the writer's personal opinion. Eighty percent of the essays contained <u>no</u> such references. Those essays that contained some mention of an authoritative source were more often written by females than by males.

More than half such references listed legal rights as justification for the writer's point of view, such as: "Each human being has the right to do what he or she wants to do." The second most common type of reference was to conventional wisdom such as using phrases like "breadwinner" for husbands and "the weaker sex" for females. Others referred to authoritative sources, such as God or scientific discoveries. Personal experience, history and analogies also were cited.

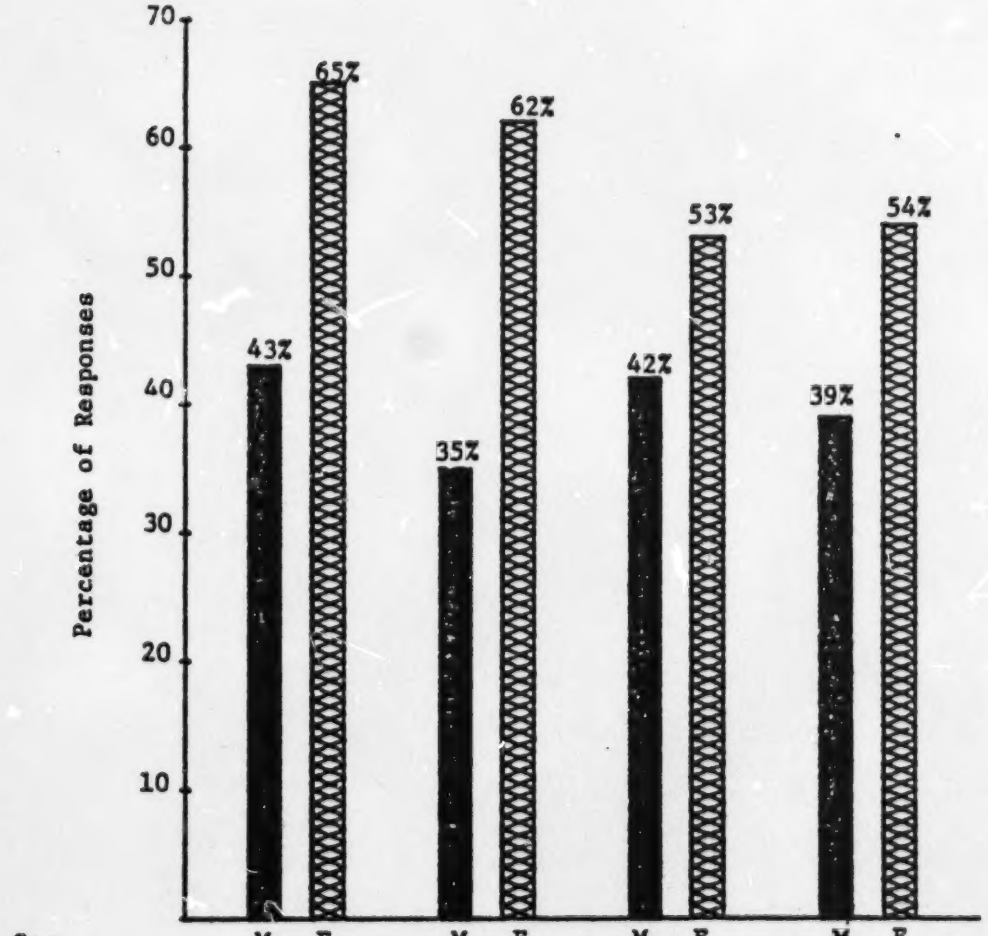
Although writing is a difficult task for most people, it is worth noting that 99 percent of the students completed the woman's place question. All National Assessment surveys are voluntary.

Attitudes Vary Widely

When the attitude aspect of the question is measured by sex, race and region of the country, it becomes clear that 17-year-olds have widely diverging opinions on this subject. In every reporting group, the females wrote to the effect that "a woman's place is where she wants it to be" more often than the males. The disparity was greatest in the Southeast where 26 percentage points separated the sexes -- a division that has sobering implications for both marriage and work relationships. Only 35% of the males in the Southeast felt women should be able to make a choice, compared with 40% of the males in other regions.

The free choice sentiment was most prevalent among females in the Eastern part of the country. In both the Northeast and the Southeast, more than 60% shared this opinion, compared with slightly more than 50% of the females in the Central and Western regions. For this reason, males and females were more closely in agreement in the nation's heartland and the West.

Percentage of Responses in
"Where She Wants" Category
for Males and Females by
Region of the Country



Black 17-year-olds had more clear-cut opinions than their white counterparts. Although 20% of the white students gave a conditional answer, just 12% of the blacks qualified their response. Blacks were also slightly more likely to answer "where ... ' than whites.

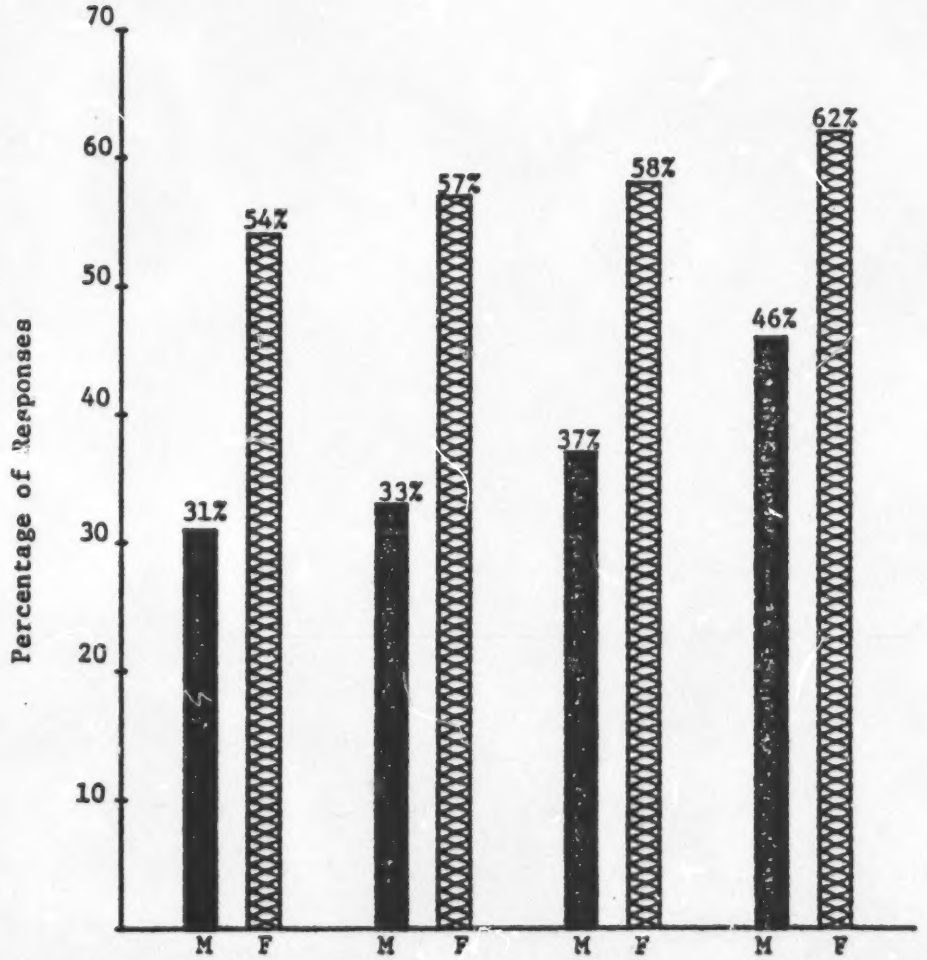
National Assessment collects results by s... sizes and types of communities, ranging from sparsely settled rural areas to several categories of cities. The rural teenagers, who live in farm-oriented communities, led the nation with "in-the-home" responses. Thirty-eight percent of the rural students shared this opinion.

"Perhaps this reflects a different perception of the statement, ' a woman's place is in the home'," said Roy Forbes, director of National Assessment. "Women play an integral part in the operation of a family-run farm. Therefore, staying at home may be viewed by rural youths as taking a partnership role in the family business." Forbes also noted that job opportunities outside the home are more limited in rural areas.

At the opposite end of the idealogical spectrum were students from affluent areas. All other community groups responded at about the national level. These groups included students from small and medium-sized cities, those from disadvantaged metropolitan areas and those from urban sections that are neither affluent nor disadvantaged.

There was a high correspondence between the level of parental education and attitudes on women and work. Among 17-year-olds, the more education one or both parents receive, the more likely it is that he or she will favor free choice for women. Just 44% of the writers whose parents had no high school education said a woman's place is where she wants it to be; it reaches its peak, 54%, with students whose parents had some post-high school training.

Percentage of Responses in "Where She Wants" Category for Males/Females by Level of Parent's Education



NHS = Those whose parent's have had no high school education.
SHS = Those who have at least one parent with some high school education.
GHS = Those who have at least one parent who graduated from high school.
PHS = Those who have at least one parent who has had some post high school education.

Reasons Given for Staying at Home

Nearly one-half of the 17-year-olds felt women should stay at home, either categorically or under certain conditions. Although many reasons were given, the one most frequently mentioned was the women's obligation to raise children. About three-fourths of both the "conditional" writers and the "in-the-home" writers mentioned children. This consideration was included more frequently by the females, especially those who felt all women should stay at home.

"Financial realities may force hard decisions on those who hold strong convictions about working mothers," said Mullis. Department of Labor statistics for 1973 indicate that half of all married women with school-age children work. Two-thirds of the divorced, widowed and separated women with school-age children work. The proportions of women with preschool children who work are smaller, but they are still significant: one-third of the married women with children and one-half the widowed, divorced and separated mothers.

"Very few writers mentioned financial need as a circumstance under which women might work," she continued. "Yet, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 58% of all working women are either self-supporting or are married to men who make less than $7,000 a year. When the number of women whose husbands make less than $10,000 a year are added, the total is 71% of all women workers. Obviously, she noted, "for most families, economics plays a major role in determining whether a woman will work."

Although economics may not have been foremost in the minds of the "conditional" and "in-the-home" responses, traditional woman's work evidently was. Nearly three-fourths of the in-the-home proponents -- the same proportion that mentioned child-rearing -- said women should remain at home to cook and clean house. One-fourth wrote that women should not work because they need to take care of their husbands.

Proportionately fewer of the conditional writers mentioned these responsibilities as obstacles to outside employment.

About 7% of all 17-year-olds argued that women should remain at home for dogmatic reasons, such as "that's the way it is." Another 4% said women were incapable of working. Although nearly three times as many males as females used this argument, about 2% of the 17-year-old females felt women were incapable of working.

Within the limits of a single essay question, it is not possible to determine the depth of the convictions stated. It is interesting to note, however, that on a career and occupational development survey given by National Assessment the same year, just 3% of the 17-year-old females listed "housewife" as their first choice for a career, compared with 21% of the female writers who insisted that women's place was in the home.

"Such findings suggest that many young American women are uncertain about their future roles in society," Forbes said. "The new and broadening job opportunities for women are encouraging career aspirations that conflict directly with traditional values."

Funded by and under contract with the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Assessment of Educational Progress is a project of the Education Commission of the States, a nonprofit organization that promotes cooperation among state education and political leaders for the improvement of education at all levels. National Assessment periodically surveys how successfully young Americans have mastered learning areas traditionally emphasized in school curricula.